

Supporting students as developing writers

AARE Conference
University of Melbourne
2.12.04

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Though it was first published more than thirty years ago, one of my favourite educational texts ever is *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. It is an insightful and engaging book, in which the authors share many memorable and life changing ways of thinking about teaching and learning, that have had a continuing influence over me since I first read it as a student teacher in the mid-seventies. The book made significant use of the work of one of my heroes at the time - the guru of media culture, Marshall McLuhan. One of my favourite things about it was that it argued in favour of the importance of teaching pupils the art of 'crap detecting'.

What Postman and Weingartner wanted, all those years ago, was for schools to equip pupils with skills in discerning value (and its lack) in the barrage of information that engulfed them. Such skill is even more necessary now, because of the information explosion that is the internet. Students need to develop skill in distinguishing reliable from unreliable web sources; more than that, however, they also need to be helped to understand why such distinctions are necessary. Now, while I can't imagine any university ever having a course on crap detection, I am thoroughly committed to the idea that much of what we do with students should be about helping them to develop such skills.

One thing that I have found particularly useful in Postman and Weingartner's book is their discussion of teachers of different kinds in terms of metaphors such as the teacher as a lamplighter as a bucket filler, or as a gardener. Like all decent ideas that I have come across, these metaphors have found their way into many different things I have done - most recently, into the work my wife and I have done together in finding ways of helping students to improve their reading. (Fairbairn and Fairbairn, 2001) They are also useful in thinking about the ways in which, as university teachers, we approach the task of supporting students as learners.

I want to invite you to reflect a little about your role as a teacher. For example, do you think you are more of a bucket filler, or more of a lamplighter? Are you perhaps sometimes one, and sometimes the other?

The teacher as a bucket filler

Many people conceptualise the teacher as a bucket filler rather negatively. For one thing, the idea of bucket filling seems to imply a model of teaching in which the teacher is merely concerned with pouring something – let's call it knowledge

– into the empty vessels that are their students’ minds. Of course, there are other reasons for thinking negatively about bucket filling teachers. After all, buckets can spring leaks, they can swish around and spill their contents everywhere, and they can be filled with almost anything, including the stuff that you put round your rhubarb to make it grow. But not everything is bad about the bucket fillers among us. After all, rather than filling them with rubbish, or even just with course content, a teacher might painstakingly fill the buckets that are her students’ minds, with beautiful jewels, or with nuggets of pure gold – creative and helpful ways of thinking, along with well founded knowledge and skills that she wants her pupils or students to learn or to develop.

The teacher as a lamplighter Most people who work in institutions in which thoroughly modern approaches to learning and teaching are encouraged, tend to view the bucket filler in a negative light, because his teaching style is essentially that of didactic instruction. By contrast, most will think rather more positively about the lamplighter viewing her, for example, as aiming to illuminate students’ minds, to spark their enthusiasm, and to enable them to see things that they could not see before.

In supporting your students in learning are you more like a lamplighter than a bucket filler? Do you feel the urge to cast light on your students’ dark places? On their questions and problems and doubts? Do you feel the need to show them the way, in places where they are confused and can’t see how to go on? Do you aim to bring them out of the shadows and into the light?

The teacher as a gardener Perhaps you are you more like a gardener, because you think about your students as being like tender plants that need careful nurturing if they are to grow safely to maturity? Regrettably in my opinion, this somewhat patronising view has become more and more common in much of British Higher Education, and perhaps especially in those institutions that are most involved in widening participation in higher education. It often goes hand in hand with the idea that in order to ensure that students are retained, they should not be pushed too much; after all, we wouldn’t want them to get the impression that university life demands commitment and a serious amount of hard work, would we?

But there is another and I think more positive side to the teacher conceived as a gardener, which perhaps, like me, you embrace – seeing your role as being largely about carefully weeding out the daft ideas your students’ have and grafting on new ones, even when doing so can make them a little uncomfortable for a time.

In preparing your lectures, do you work out carefully the best time to plant each seed – each new idea, each new way of thinking? Are you careful with all of the plants in your care? Or abandoning ideas about equality of opportunity, do you find yourself focusing more on the prize specimens, leaving the others to fend for themselves; or in a perverse reversal, do you find yourself giving lots of extra time to students who are less gifted, or perhaps just less hard working, because you feel sorry for them? Are you so anxious to make sure that your little seedlings do well, that you pour your time and energy into those that are failing, in a frantic effort to ensure that they get through, even if that means neglecting

other aspects of your job – such as research and your own professional development, as well as stimulating your high fliers? Are you willing, (and this is an aspect of the gardening of students that most people find difficult) to assist your institution in weeding out weak specimens when it comes to assessment?

The teacher as a Grand Prix driver

But perhaps you are more like the kind of teacher that I refer to as the Grand Prix driver, who has a very well developed sense of the ground that her students must cover in order to gain the skills they need to succeed? Like her racing counterpart she is anxious to cover the ground as quickly as possible, to ensure that her students have certain experiences, encounter certain skills, and get to grips with certain problems and realities of life as a student. She wants them to get through the list of things to experience and accomplish, the skills to develop and master, as quickly as possible. Like a Grand Prix driver she is not really interested in the scenery as she passes through, on her annual circuit of the course. She is not really as concerned as she might be, with the quality of the experience her students have, just so long as she can tick off the relevant boxes in the module outline. In justifying her salary cheque every month the grand prix driver is concerned neither with the quality of the thinking that underpins her teaching and her interactions with students, nor with the need to help them to develop critical thinking – skill, you might say, in crap detecting. All she really wants is to be able to demonstrate that her students have visited each piece of knowledge, and each skill that appears in the syllabus; she considers herself successful if she can demonstrate that her students can act in ways that indicate some degree of familiarity, or even something that looks a bit competence, in relation to them. Of course, you may well work in an institution in which there are no Grand Prix drivers. But perhaps not. Perhaps, if pressed, you could even point out a few in the senior common room.

The teacher as a tour operator

Unlike the Grand Prix driver, the teacher as a tour operator is interested in the landscape that she passes through with her students. Indeed her *raison d'être* is to point out places of interest to them. However, like most people who work in the holiday and leisure industry, she is usually very selective about the places she takes them to see; for example, she is likely to avoid intellectually demanding locations and ideas that might upset them by challenging them too much – whether intellectually or, for example, ethically, because she sees her role as being to ensure that they have an enjoyable time, while making sure that they are safe. Given her commercial interests, the teacher as a tour operator has a great commitment to ensuring that no-one opts out of the tour halfway through; retention is on her mind, rather than excitement and challenge. On the other hand, just as there are tour operators who go to far flung places and give their clients some real excitement and challenge, there are teachers who fit into the sub species of teacher as tour operator, who are not afraid to take students into genuinely exciting places, exploring new ideas and encouraging them to make up their own minds about difficult issues.

As you will perhaps realise, I have shared only a few of the metaphors for teachers that are possible. For example, I have not mentioned the teacher as a map maker, or juggler. The map maker wants to help her students to map out the territory they have to cover, helping them to decide how to navigate their way across the difficult terrain ahead,

perhaps pointing out a few of the significant and entertaining landmarks they can expect to encounter on the way, while the juggler's main concern is to teach her students how to keep lots of balls – lots of ideas and tasks, in the air at once. You may want, as we move into what I want to say about helping students to develop as academic writers, to reflect about how these different kinds of teachers might approach the task of facilitating students' development of the skills necessary for writing.

Helping students to develop as readers and writers

The ways in which we support students in their development as readers and writers is a matter of great concern for me, because along with the facilitation of students' understanding of and skills in reasoning and argument, I think the most important thing that university educators should be doing is ensuring that their students leave not only with a degree, but with decent skills in reading and writing. That is why I believe – wholeheartedly – that the study of subject disciplines should be abandoned as the main focus of university study, and that except in the case of education and training for particular professions where particular knowledge and skills will have to form part of the curriculum, higher education should be mainly given over to these three things: reading, writing and reasoning. I believe strongly that our primary task should be to make students competent in these three areas, because this will allow them to function well as learners in any area as they progress through life. Actually I also believe that everyone should have a significant encounter with ethical thinking while they are a student, because that might help to make the world a better place; however, this will be part of the third element of the core curriculum – ie reasoning.

Now of course I realise that if we are going to teach skills in reading, writing and reasoning as the core of university education, we will have to teach them in relation to something, and this leaves room for work on the subjects that appear on curricula at present. However, it is important to be clear that I am serious in my claim that the reason for their presence in our syllabuses will not be to provide students with knowledge in these areas, but merely to give us something to read, write and reason about, with students.

Literacy skills are centrally important for everyone in higher education. Students need to read and write. They need to read, because it is one of the most important ways in which they access information and increase their knowledge. They need to write, so that they can record their ideas and the knowledge they acquire, whether through reading or in other ways; and they need to be able to write fluently and clearly, because academic authorship is still one of the main ways, probably the main way we assess whether students have learned anything, and if they have, whether they are able to communicate what they have learned and thought.

Like most teachers in higher education I have put a great deal of effort into the attempt to help students to write better essays and assignments. Like all teachers I have done this partly by drawing attention to places where they are factually mistaken, and to aspects of their topic that they have failed to address adequately. Even more importantly, however, like all teachers, I have tried to help students to improve their ability as writers by commenting on the structure and presentation of their work – drawing attention to places where it is unclear or poorly argued, and to places where they have made technical mistakes in their use of language, including grammatical mistakes, which spoil the sense of what they are trying to communicate. I should make clear that in talking about the need to attend to grammar I am not talking about a pedantic insistence on grammatical

correctness, if there is such a thing, but merely on the need to attend, at the most basic level, to whether what is written says what the author thinks it says, or even anything at all, that makes sense.

Sometimes I share my comments on students' assignments in writing – marking them on submitted assignments or drafts; and sometimes I even do so in awful red pen. However, I prefer to share them in discussion. More than that, I favour feedback sessions with whole classes, rather than individual feedback, which I recognise puts me at odds with many colleagues, who believe that to give feedback to a student in front of his peers is unhelpful, because it could be embarrassing and even harmful for him to have his weaknesses pointed out in front of them. Indeed some colleagues have even accused me of unethical conduct when I confess to this aspect of my pedagogic practice, though interestingly, those who have seen it in action seem to have a different view. Sensitivity to students' feelings is both laudable. However, in my experience it is a mistake to allow sensitivity to the possibility that students might take offence, to dictate how and when you should deliver feedback, because given a certain degree of kindness on your part, commenting on a student's work in front of an audience of his peers, is nearly always a positive experience.

Of course, there may be occasions when individual feedback is called for. However, I believe that it is a very good practice for lecturers to give at least some feedback in the context of a class discussion, because this allows them to draw attention to shared and common problems in an efficient way. In such sessions I sometimes focus mainly or even solely on points that have arisen in a number of individuals' work. In my experience students find it helpful to know that they are not the only ones who lack particular skills or knowledge, or who have made particular mistakes. For one thing, it gives them permission to avoid engaging in the kind of pretence at which the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing pointed when he summed up the experience of the intellectual and emotional tangles in which many people become involved, in trying to avoid exposing their ignorance:

There is something I don't know
that I am supposed to know.
I don't know *what* it is I am supposed to know,
and yet I am supposed to know,
and I feel I look stupid
if I seem both not to know it
and not know *what* it is I don't know.
Therefore I pretend I know it.

R. D. Laing, *Knots* (p 56)

Do you ever pretend to know what you don't know? Do you think that your students do? Do you think that they ever pretend to understand what they don't understand?

Or are your students brave enough - wise enough - to ask for help when they are uncertain, whether their uncertainty is about a piece of knowledge or skill, or just about their confidence in their ability? If they aren't, I think it is important that you spare no effort in the attempt to persuade them that since their job is to learn, even at the expense of admitting that they don't know, the sooner they learn to admit that at times they don't know and understand, the better. To attempt to avoid looking foolish in front of their peers by pretending that they understand when they don't, is just about the most stupid

thing that a student can do, while honestly admitting to ignorance, thus opening themselves to the possibility of learning, is probably the most important thing they can learn to do.

I think that one of the best things that we can teach our students is that it is OK to be unsure about things, and that knowing that they don't know is a sign of strength rather than a sign of weakness. One way we might do this is by teaching in a way that makes it clear that we don't know everything that there is to know about anything. I find that this sits very easily with me, since I admit to knowing very little about anything.

So how do I think that we can best support students in developing skill as academic writers?

I want, finally, to talk a little about how I think we can best enable students to develop skill in writing. Strangely enough, what I have to say is largely about teaching them to be better readers.

Shared 'Live' editing

I find that the best way to help students to develop their writing skill, is to work with them on drafts of their work. When I am doing so I try as far as I can, to avoid responding on paper, 'marking up' their text as a copy-editor would, noting errors and making suggestions for improvements. I know from experience, as you probably do, how soul destroying it can be to receive work back from another person covered in suggestions and questions and remarks.

My preferred way of enabling students in their writing is to edit their text 'live', which I find the least threatening way to help them to learn to listen objectively to suggestions about their texts. In working on their texts with them I am principally concerned to help them to develop skill in critically reading their own work, assessing it for clarity and coherence. I am increasingly convinced that learning to critically read one's own work is the single most important skill that academic authors – whether they are professionals or students, must learn. Such skill allows you to edit your attempts at writing down the ideas that have either formed or are forming in your mind; it is easy to develop, though it involves making a leap of faith into thinking that it is OK to acknowledge that what you have written is less good than it could be - and perhaps, that it is literary (and sometimes even literally) nonsense.

It is always easier to detect problems in other people's writing than it is to detect them in your own. Partly this is because in reading what you have written it is so tempting to skip over material with which, as the author, you are familiar. But partly it is because familiarity with what you wanted to say can lead to a situation in which, rather than reading what is in front of your eyes, you 'read' what you wanted to say, in other words the idea that was in your head, rather than what you actually committed to print. That is why I urge students to develop the habit of trying always to read their work as if it was written by someone else. In addition I try to persuade them that if they want to be a writer, they should read their own work out loud as often as possible, because doing so makes it much more difficult to avoid noticing that what you have written fails to make sense.

I have found that engaging with them in the process of live editing something they have written is the most fruitful and least painful way of helping others, whether they are students or colleagues, to develop their skills as writers; it is also, incidentally, one of the best ways of supporting them in developing their text. Working on their text on screen ensures that it grows and changes and transforms as we discuss the problems or weaknesses that I think I detect, and that they think they detect. When I am live editing, whether I am doing so with one or two colleagues or students, or with a much larger group, I like to ‘drive’ the computer - partly because I wordprocess quickly and fluently, but partly also, because it allows me to model certain aspects of the creation and modification of text.

In my own work as an author, rather than trying to work out precisely what changes must be made to improve an unclear, longwinded or over complicated sentence before beginning to work on it on my computer, I like to play with possibilities on screen, until eventually after successive modifications, a better version appears. For those who like me, engage in it, this playing with text will seem to be an obvious tactic. However, in my experience surprisingly few people actually engage in it, perhaps because they are afraid of losing their way, or perhaps because they have poorly developed keyboard skills. Or perhaps it is just that they are so afraid of the possibility of losing the forms of words they have already put down, that they would rather ‘freeze’ them, than take the risk of losing them in attempting to find an even better form.

It is because the way in which text is laid out can make a huge difference to the ease with which one can understand what is being said, that when I am working with students on the development of their texts in a live editing session, the first thing I consider is the way in which it is presented. I do so because, if necessary, I want as early as possible to draw their attention to the fact that readability can be improved enormously by attending to lay-out.

Even such simple changes as leaving an extra space between paragraphs, or adopting the convention of indenting paragraphs that do not follow directly after features such as headings, sub-headings, indented quotations or examples, can make a big difference to the ease with which a reader can follow a text. I want students to be aware that using a simple, easy to read font and a sensible font size, makes text easier to read. I want them to know that simple typographical devices, such as left justifying all headings and subheadings (rather than centring some – the more important ones, so that the eye has to wander backwards and forwards over the page) simplifies the appearance of the page and makes text both easier to read, and easier to work with.

Of course, there are dangers in encouraging people to attend too closely to typography, not least of which is the danger that by helping a fledgling writer to make her work look better, we might unintentionally induce in her the false belief that this necessarily renders it better in a literary sense. This is obviously something we must guard against, and it is why it is important always to emphasise that consistency and simplicity in layout is not about making text look nice, but about helping to make its structure and hence the arguments it contains, or the story it tells, clearer.

Editing in a group

Though I have spent a great deal of time in supporting others in developing writing skills on a one-to-one basis, the most effective way I have found of doing so, is in the context of a supportive and nurturing group, in which the participants engage in the shared

editing of texts. With both students and academic colleagues, I have found such groups to be good places in which to offer individual support for learning about academic writing. Typically, during such a session we will work on one or more texts written by participants – which may be whole essays or articles, but may be shorter passages, or even single paragraphs. I find the most effective way to do this is to use a data projector to allow the whole group to view the text - ‘live’ on screen as I help the author to edit and shape it, in front of a supportive audience. The other participants are invited to offer comments, with the proviso that they must aim to be supportive and enabling; as a result, they almost inevitably show their appreciation of the protagonists’ efforts, sharing what they like about her work as well as identifying problems and suggesting possible ways of improving her text. However, in order to achieve this situation, it is important to make clear at the outset, that shared live editing sessions are not intended to provide an opportunity to engage in the bloodsport of criticising one another’s writing skill or style, but an opportunity to develop together as writers.

I have found shared live editing particularly useful with groups of postgraduates whether they are at the stage of developing the proposals for their research project, or developing the text of their thesis; and with colleagues who are working on articles intended for publication, but it is just as useful for undergraduate students. The texts that participants offer up for public scrutiny may be at a variety of stages of development. Sometimes they are already be rather advanced; in such cases the protagonist may choose to circulate his ‘performance’ beforehand, so that when he asks to focus on a particular section, they know how it relates to the piece as a whole. On the other hand, a protagonist may want to work on a piece that is in a very rudimentary state. Indeed, sometimes I work with text that has not even been drafted before the session and is brought along as nothing more than an embryonic imagining in its author’s mind. This can be very productive.

The way in which mistakes are addressed during shared live editing is particularly worthy of mention, because they are sometimes the source of a great deal of humour as protagonist and participants alike collapse in fits of giggles as they begin, for example, to spot the stylistic ‘tics’ that characterise a particular author’s work (and we all have such tics; one of mine is the overuse of semi-colons). Now having one’s mistakes spotted and laughed over in public could be traumatic, were it not for the fact that such sessions almost always turn into joyously happy and supportive places, in which learners and experienced authors alike can rest assured that mistakes are not taken as a sign of weakness and stupidity, but rather as a sign of ordinariness. Nonetheless, lest potential participants should be put off by the idea of exposing their weakness to their peers, I always introduce participants to the idea of live editing by offering something that I have written myself as the first subject for attention. Sometimes I use text that I have downgraded from a finished piece - from a published article say, by making changes that pepper it with a range of mistakes. But sometimes I use text that is genuinely at an early stage of development, because that way I can be sure to provide participants with a feast of examples of all kinds of errors and all kinds of problems, as I attempt, in front of an audience, to find the best way to say what I want to say, or even to decide what I want to say.

I have already said that I think that supportive groups in which shared editing takes place are a good vehicle for offering students individual support for the development of writing skills. By now you may be wondering how I can possibly view the process of live editing in a group as a way of providing individual support for learning.

It is about individual support, because over the course of a series of such sessions each person has the opportunity to receive such support in developing not only his or her text, but his or her skills as an academic writer. Not only that, but when they are participating as the protagonist – that is, when it is their text the group is working on, each member of such a group receives individual support for their learning not only from the teacher, but from their peers. This approach thus has the added benefit of being a very good way of developing peer support.

My enthusiasm for this way of working on academic literacy is thus formed, not only out of my experience of seeing it work, but out of my belief that it is a very economical way of supporting students as learners, because of the effects that it can have, not only on each individual student, but also on the culture of the groups of individuals who engage in it.

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